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*Bill Cosgrave*

Understanding  
Spirituality  
Today

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# Understanding Spirituality Today

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Bill Cosgrave

Most of us Christians – and many others too - are quite accustomed to hearing and using phrases like ‘the spiritual life’, ‘spiritual things’, ‘spiritual direction’ and in more recent times ‘spirituality’. These phrases have long been important, even central, expressions in our Christian lives and in Christian teaching and preaching. Up to comparatively recent years the reference of these phrases tended to be, largely, to the practices of prayer, meditation, devotional reading, self-denial and ascetical practices, Mass and the sacraments and pilgrimages. Many referred to these practices as being the main elements of their ‘spiritual’ lives.

Today, however, many Christian teachers and writers see this way of characterising the spiritual life as being rather too narrow and, hence, as being split off from the moral, social and political dimensions of the Christian life.<sup>1</sup>

Important steps have of late been taken to overcome this split and to provide a fuller and more adequate understanding of what is meant by phrases like ‘the ‘spiritual life’ and ‘the spiritual’. This contemporary effort may be characterised and summarised by using the relatively new and now very popular word ‘spirituality’.

In this article an effort will be made to explain this spirituality and its more important aspects and to see how, properly understood, it gives us an accurate account of the Christian life – and of other lifestyles also.

## THE GREAT INTEREST IN SPIRITUALITY TODAY

One has to go no further today than a visit to a good bookshop to discover that one of the very popular subjects in contemporary society as well as in religious circles is spirituality. In such a shop one will usually find a sizeable section of the selves devoted to this topic with titles ranging from the Bible and the latest volume on the

1 Donal Dorr, *Spirituality – Our Deepest Heart's Desire*. The Columba Press, Dublin, 2008, p 8. Henceforth cited as *Spirituality*. Also Richard M. Gula, S.S., *The Call to Holiness-Embracing a fully Christian Life*. Paulist Press, New York/ Mahwah, N.J. 2003, pp 36-39 & Chapter 2. Henceforth cited as *Holiness*.

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Bill Cosgrave is a priest of the Diocese of Ferns. Address: Monageer, Ferns, Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford.

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Pope and his understanding of the Christian message to numerous accounts of angels, a great variety of titles that can be labelled 'New Age', several programmes in the Self-Help category and much literature on Eastern religions and their religious traditions.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, spirituality is very popular in our time and not just among Christians and other religious people. There is a strong interest in spirituality among many non-religious or secular people. This latter may surprise some but, as we will see later, it is quite a strong and widespread trend and for very good reasons.

### THE MANY MEANINGS OF SPIRITUALITY

Despite this widespread interest in spirituality and the vast literature now being devoted to it, there remains great uncertainty and even confusion about what spirituality really is in both secular and religious writing. A brief look at this confused situation will provide a convincing reason and justification for an attempt here to improve our understanding of the nature of spirituality, both secular and religious.

It is generally accepted today that there is no agreed definition or even description of spirituality. In fact one author tells us that one book he has seen lists 23 different definitions of it. It seems, he says, that everyone who writes about the subject has his or her own definition for this dimension of life – and he adds his own!<sup>3</sup> Another spiritual writer speaks of a 'sometimes staggering multiplicity of meanings given to spirituality'.<sup>4</sup>

It would, of course, be presumptuous to imagine that this uncertainty and confusion can be dispelled here, but an attempt may be made to work towards a description of spirituality by building on the informed work of many scholars, past and present.

### WE ARE SPIRITUAL BEINGS

We may begin by recalling that we human beings are constituted as persons by the union of our two basic and essential dimensions: spirit and matter. These dimensions are distinct but not opposed and they form the unity we call and know as the human person. Now we may ask: what does it mean to say we are spirit in the world? What are we talking about when we use the term spirit in this context or what does it mean to say that we human beings are spiritual, have a spiritual dimension?

Here some insights from Karl Rahner will help us.<sup>5</sup> This great theologian says that being spirit or having a spiritual dimension

2 Michael Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality*. Paulist Press, New York & Mahwah, N.J., 1997, chapter 1.

3 Gula, *Holiness*, pp 17-18.

4 Downey, p 1.

5 As quoted in Downey, p 33.

means that we human beings have the ability to move out beyond ourselves or to transcend ourselves in and through pursuing knowledge, acting in freedom and loving others. These three characteristic human abilities and activities are possible for us because we are spirit living in this world of other human persons and material creation. So we human beings are by nature spiritual and this means in practice that we have the capacity to know and be known, to love and be loved, to be free and enable others to be free. And in so far as we exercise these capacities we act as spiritual beings. We may say, then, that because we are spiritual beings, there is a dynamism within us that enables us to reach out in love and commit ourselves to good causes, to seek to grow in knowledge and wisdom, and to deepen our freedom to give ourselves more fully and wholeheartedly to our chosen goals and values.

This understanding of us humans as spiritual is paralleled in the work of John Macquarrie.<sup>6</sup> ‘Spirit’, he says, may be described as a capacity for going out of oneself and beyond oneself, or, again, as the capacity for transcending oneself. ... ‘It is this openness, freedom, creativity for going beyond any given state in which he [man] finds himself that makes possible self-consciousness, understanding, conscientiousness, the pursuit of knowledge, the sense of beauty, the quest of the good, the formation of community, the outreach of love and whatever else belongs to the amazing richness of what we call the life of the spirit.’ He adds (p 45), that ‘The more man goes out from himself or goes beyond himself, the more the spiritual dimension of his life is deepened, the more he becomes truly man, the more also he grows in likeness to God, who is Spirit... This is the strange paradox of spiritual being – that precisely by going out and spending itself, it realises itself.’

SPIRITUALITY – WHAT IS IT?

In the light of this understanding of human beings as spiritual, of us humans as spirit in the world, we are naturally led to ask the question about spirituality.

It would seem to follow here that a person’s spirituality is simply how a person, as a spiritual being, as spirit in the world, believes, lives and acts in his/her personal life, in his/her relationships, in his/her communities, in God’s creation and, of course, for the religious person, in his/her relationship with God. How one believes, lives and acts will, naturally, be governed by the ideals, principles, values and virtues that one has adopted and committed oneself to and by means of which one seeks to develop a meaningful, productive and happy life in one’s circumstances.

6 John Macquarrie, *Paths in Spirituality*. SCM Press, London, 1972, chapter IV at p 44.

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We may express this in words closer to Rahner's reflections as follows. One's spirituality will be the expression of the human spirit's effort or striving to develop oneself as a person by doing all possible to bring about authentic growth in knowledge, in freedom and in loving relationships.<sup>7</sup> This will involve one in living by such values, principles and ideals as will serve to integrate one's life and make it meaningful. In other words, we can say that one's spirituality is one's way of consciously striving to integrate one's life and make it meaningful through pursuing knowledge, freedom and love in light of and governed by the highest and most important ideals, values and principles that one has discerned, chosen and endeavours to live out and realise in one's life as a person who is spirit, who is a spiritual being. (See Downey, pp 15 & 33). Finally, to put it briefly, we may quote Macquarrie again, 'spirituality has to do with *becoming a person in the fullest sense* [his emphasis] (p 40).

### ASPECTS OF SPIRITUALITY

It will be important and helpful here to note briefly some of the implications of this understanding of spirituality, that is, some aspects of it that are as yet implicit in the preceding reflections.

#### (1) Everyone has a spirituality

This is obvious from what has been said. As spiritual beings we live and act in the way we do, because of the values, principles, ideals and virtues we have made our own and which enable us to live a meaningful and satisfying life, whether we are religious or not. Even though we may never have considered ourselves as having a spirituality and might not even be happy to put it in those terms, it remains the case that what governs and inspires our life and its activities is what we are here calling our spirituality. It will be clear also that human life is impossible in any truly human sense without a spirituality of some sort. And since each individual must and does choose and work out his or her spirituality, there will of necessity be a great variety of spiritualities, some more adequate than others in making one's life meaningful and worth living.

#### (2) Spirituality concerns the deeper dimensions of life

It will be clear from our description of spirituality that it is focused on and is concerned with the deeper dimensions of human existence – with our effort to integrate our lives and make them meaningful as we try to live by and live out our basic ideals, principles and values, in pursuit of growth in knowledge, freedom and love. Some authors are of the opinion that our Western culture is so

<sup>7</sup> Downey, p 31.

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pervaded by superficiality and individualism and made restless and fearful by the shocks of two world Wars, etc. that many have become searchers for something more stable, positive and personally enriching that will help to satisfy their deep desires for peace, meaning and truly human living. Hence, they say, the turn to spirituality in our time.<sup>8</sup> This means a focus on our vision of life and its ideals, values and commitments. Here the concern is with the more profound areas of human existence that are fundamental to human growth and that give meaning and joy to human beings. This is what spirituality, secular and religious, is about and seeks to promote. For the religious person and in particular the Christian this deeper dimension of life will be focused on God, the ultimate reality and mystery of human life and will be expressed and nourished by prayer, meditation and religious ritual.

### (3) Spirituality gives meaning to our lives

One of the basic and crucial desires and necessities in the life of us all as spiritual beings is to find meaning in life, to live a meaningful life. We all search for meaning in life and, if we find it, we will experience life as worthwhile and will be happy to continue the lifestyle we thus find rewarding. If we ask – as we seldom do – what makes our life meaningful and worthwhile, then the answer, in a word, is our spirituality as understood above. This may be religious or non-religious, it may be complex or simple, communal or just personal, but it is the ideals, principles, values and virtues that inspire and energise us to pursue knowledge, freedom and love that give meaning to our lives as spiritual beings and make our search for meaning satisfying and rewarding.<sup>9</sup>

### (4) Spirituality has a necessary moral dimension

From what has already been said it will be clear that any and every spirituality will and must include a moral dimension, a morality that will express and concretise that spirituality in the course of one's daily life and activity. Every spiritual person is also and necessarily a moral person, living according to his or her moral ideals, principles, values and virtues. Morality is, then, a key element in spirituality.<sup>10</sup> So we can say that the moral life is spiritual at its source and the spiritual life is moral in its manifestations.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the roots of one's moral life are in one's spirituality and the fruits of one's spirituality are in the moral life.<sup>12</sup> Or again, our spirituality is concerned with the wellsprings of our actions

8 See Downey, pp 15-23.

9 See Gula, *Holiness*, 18-19.

10 Dorr, p 116.

11 Gula, *Holiness*, pp 31, 39.

12 Gula, *Holiness*, p 62.

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and in our moral life we express our spirituality.<sup>13</sup> Our moral life flows from and is informed by our spirituality and our spirituality is, in turn, expressed in and shaped by our moral life.<sup>14</sup> So Gula says: ‘...spiritual practices ...carry a rich potential for changing our moral life when we engage [in] them with the right intention and with deep commitment.’<sup>15</sup>

We can see the close connection between spirituality and morality also when we recall that the moral life and spirituality converge when we begin to explore the sort of persons we ought to become and the sort of lives we ought to live in order to flourish as authentic human beings.<sup>16</sup> It will be important to note here also that in speaking of morality in the context of spirituality we refer not merely to morality in a narrow personal sense but also to one’s moral ideals, values and principles in relation to social, economic, political and environmental matters. These too will form part of and be inspired by one’s spirituality.

### (5) Spirituality is concerned with experience

Given that spirituality, and in particular Christian spirituality has an essential moral dimension and provides motivation and inspiration for our moral activity and the moral values and virtues that we cultivate as we form our moral character, it will be clear that our spirituality has to do with our experience of life with other people and in society. In addition, for the religious person there will also be the experience he or she will have in his or her relationship with God, that is, his or her experience of prayer, meditation and religious ritual, especially the sacraments. Dorr in his book *Spirituality*, chapters 1, 2 and 5, presents a discussion of interpersonal and personal spiritual experiences, which, he believes, underpin a wide variety of our moral values and virtues (pp 10, 22 & 24). These spiritual experiences include such significant human realities as falling in love, giving birth, being reconciled with a friend, being healed in body, mind or spirit, experiencing a call from God, being moved by the wonders of nature (pp 10, 17-21, 25, 28-29).

It will be important to note at this point that, while spirituality is concerned with our experience rather than theories, the insights gained from our experience as spiritual persons in and through pursuing knowledge, acting in freedom and loving others, whether as religious or non-religious people, can be formulated or expressed in many different ways. Downey states this as follows (p 42): ‘Such

13 Richard M. Gula, S.S., *The Good Life – Where Morality and Spirituality Converge*, Paulist Press, New York/Mahwah, N. J. 2003, p 3. Henceforth cited as *The Good Life*.

14 Gula, *Holiness*, p 211.

15 *Holiness*, p 157.

16 Gula, *The Good Life*, p 5.

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formulation may be expressed in writings such as sacred scripture, theological writings in the Christian tradition as well as treatises on prayer ... in popular wisdom, song, legend and story ... in the visual arts ... in sacred music ... popular devotions and liturgical and religious dress.' All this is another level of spirituality and one that we know well and take for granted as important and necessary for us as Christians in the church community. In secular spirituality a similar process of formulation can be observed with its many expressions in writing, song, story, etc.

### (6) Spirituality is a communal reality

One has the impression that nowadays some individuals tend to adopt a narrowly personal or even individualistic form of spirituality, e.g., among some New Age adherents. However, history and social living generally teach us that spiritualities usually develop in community, give coherence and unity to that community and enrich it with good moral and spiritual values and lifestyle. Such communal spiritualities generate a sense of belonging and of commitment to one's community and its welfare. 'Sporting occasions or concerts represent a secular version of this dimension of spirituality, while liturgical services represent the most obvious religious version.'<sup>17</sup> This communal aspect of spirituality is particularly evident in Christianity, past and present, where our spirituality is based on and arises from the example and teaching of Jesus and, as it has evolved and developed over the centuries, it has bound the Christian community together and inspired it to ever better Christian believing, living and prayerful service of God and Christian people.

### SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGION

One frequently hears or reads the statement these days which says: 'I'm spiritual but not religious'. What is meant precisely by this will often be far from obvious but it certainly distances the speaker/writer from what are usually spoken of as the great religions of the world and anything else that may be classed as an organised or institutional religion. A rather extreme version of this rejection of religion may be found in the assertion by some of those who may be called spiritual searchers as follows: Every religion begins with the answers; the spiritual quest begins with the opposite. It begins with the questions.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps it is true to say that the Christian Churches and the organised religions of the world are failing to meet the spiritual/

<sup>17</sup> Kevin Williams, *The Irish Times*, 17 January 2017, in his column 'Spirituality can be found in believers and non-believers.'

<sup>18</sup> Ronald Rolheiser, *Seeking Spirituality – Guidelines for a Christian Spirituality for the Twenty-First Century*. Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1998, p 33.

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religious needs of these searchers and many others too and, hence, many, especially in the Western world with its culture of affluence, waste and triviality, are forsaking these religious bodies and adopting a spirituality of their own, which may be of various kinds and is perhaps an amalgam of beliefs, values and rituals from many sources, e.g., New Age, Buddhist, Self Help, etc. Such spiritualities may be very personal and even individual or may have a group or communal dimension.<sup>19</sup> Dorr says (p 119): ‘Quite frequently, these ‘searchers’ do not feel any need to organise their spirituality into a fully coherent system or even to articulate it in any very explicit form.’ Others searchers may have lapsed into indifference or some form of agnosticism or even atheism.

The opposition today, as many see it, between spirituality and religion is unfortunate. We can say that at its best religion can be a ‘carrier’ of spirituality; it is an institutionalised spiritual tradition. When a spiritual tradition becomes fixed, when it develops rules, which people are expected to follow, when it spells out its basic beliefs as ‘teachings’ or ‘doctrines’, which people are asked to accept, and when a set of authority figures emerge to ensure that the tradition is followed, then it has become a religion.<sup>20</sup> It would seem that for many today the institutional structures of Christianity and of other religions are obscuring the spirituality they carry, promote and attempt to live by. This would seem to be a major factor in the disenchantment so many of these searchers experience in relation to the religions of the world.

### CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

Here a brief discussion of our Christian spirituality will be adequate to our purposes in the context of this article. Of course there is no fully accepted description of the spirituality we live by as Christians, but we can sketch the main outlines of what theologians and spiritual writers today are saying about this understanding of spirituality.

Gula gives the following description: ‘Christian spirituality is that specific form of religious spirituality that presupposes belief in a personal, loving God, revealed in Jesus through the Holy Spirit in the community of the church.’<sup>21</sup> This description of the foundations of our spirituality needs to be spelled out so as to make it clearer how it relates to our daily life and experience. Downey

19 See Donal Dorr, *Divine Energy – God beyond us, Within us, Among us*. Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1996, pp 116-119. See also Dorr’s book *Time for a Change – A Fresh Look at Spirituality, Sexuality, Globalisation, and the Church*. The Columba Press, Dublin, 2004, chapter 3: ‘Spirituality and Religion’. Henceforth cited as *Time for a Change*.

20 Dorr, *Time for a Change*, p 63.

21 *Holiness*, p 20.

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says: 'Christian spirituality ... *is* the Christian life itself lived in and through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit ... it concerns absolutely every dimension of life.'<sup>22</sup> This has been made clear in our earlier discussion of the relation of spirituality and morality.

So for us Christian spirituality and life are about God loving us in Christ and our responding to that love in and through our attitudes, values, virtues, relationships and activities, moral and religious in the Church community. Central here will be the religious and moral ideals and values which Jesus practised and taught and which we his disciples are called to make our own and by which we are to shape our moral character and way of life.

We may outline what may be called a balanced Christian spirituality and way of life following for the most part the helpful insights of Donal Dorr.<sup>23</sup>

- God's love for us: our religious response – faith and prayerfulness

This will require a religious conversion on our part as we try to grow in faith in God revealed in Christ and engage in a regular pattern of prayer both personal and communal or ecclesial. Openness to the promptings of the Holy Spirit should characterise our Christian living, while it will be important to engage in Christian reflection and meditation on the Scriptures, the wisdom of our Christian tradition, our church's teaching and our own experience as we live the Christian spiritual life.

- God's love for us: our moral response – loving others

This is our call as disciples of Jesus to love our neighbour as Jesus taught in the variety of relationships we establish in the course of our lives, in the family, in the neighbourhood, in the Church and in society at large. God's love in Jesus enables us to love our neighbour and in loving him/her we love God too. Important here also will be the call to love oneself, since without that one cannot love others or God.

- God's love for us: our moral response – practising social justice and care for the earth

Here our spirituality extends its orbit to embrace the good of society worldwide, and calls us to seek to build a society and a world that is just, not only in its activities but also and especially in its structures, institutions, laws and practices. Included here

<sup>22</sup> Downey, p 45.

<sup>23</sup> Donal Dorr, *Spirituality and Justice*. Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1984, chapter 1. See also Dorr's books *Spirituality*, Part 111 and *Time for Change*, chapters 1 and 2. Also William Cosgrave, *The Challenge of Christian Discipleship*. The Columba Press, Dublin, 2012, pp 129-130.

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too is the call to do all we can to care for the earth and enhance God's creation as fully as possible. This call to practise social justice is today expressed in the Church by saying that we have a moral duty to make an option for the poor. This will require a deep moral commitment, social and political, so that one is dedicated to building a just society and promoting the development and enhancement of God's creation.

### SPIRITUALITY AS A SCHOLARLY DISCIPLINE

While the word spirituality has primarily an experiential reference, as indicated above, it is today used also to designate the scholarly study of the spiritual life and its spiritual experience, especially in the Christian Church. Hence, in regard to Christian spirituality it is true to say that the term spirituality refers to both a lived experience and an academic discipline.<sup>24</sup> One studies spirituality, of course, to understand it but also to foster one's own spirituality and, in so far as one can, to foster that of others.<sup>25</sup> Spirituality in this academic sense is a field of studies with its own object of investigation, approaches and methods.<sup>26</sup>

### SPIRITUALITY AND THEOLOGY

In the past within the Christian Churches spirituality as a scholarly study was usually viewed as a specialisation within moral theology and ethics. Now it is seeking its own area of specialisation and a relative independence or partnership in relation to technical theology. While spirituality is concerned with Christian experience and with the practice of the Christian faith, theology can provide important assistance. It can help to 'clarify, evaluate, support, challenge and sometimes correct the experience of persons and groups, past and present'. Thus theology can judge experience, while spiritual experience and especially new experiences can force a rethink in theology and a reformulation of the theological position or expression of the faith.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Downey, p 43.

<sup>25</sup> Joann Wolski Conn, in her article 'Spirituality' in *The New Dictionary of Theology*. Editors: Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins & Dermot Lane. Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1987, p 982.

<sup>26</sup> Downey, p 42. See Downey, chapter 6 'Studying Spirituality' for a helpful discussion of this topic.

<sup>27</sup> Downey, p 125.